



A THIEF
ES
N?!?

ede Akamatsu
ultimate
pianist

CLUE
A SHUICHI SAIHARA ZINE

WHO IS SHE?
?

CLUE

A SHUICHI SAIHARA FANZINE



@SaiharaZine

Clue is an appreciation Fanzine for the protagonist of DanganronpaV3, Shuichi Saihara.
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A LINGERING GHOST

BY: SCORNFUL_TRUTH

Freezing air filled his lungs as he took another deep breath.

Shuichi pressed his forehead against the heels of his sweaty palms. The small porch of his apartment blinked into his mind before he squeezed his eyes shut. Another deep breath. Another exhale. Blindly, his hands found the railing, grasping it for support.

Nightmares. Nightmares, he repeated to himself. But it didn't calm his heart.

Pressure swelled in his head, causing his temples to throb. He pressed his hands to his eyes. A flash of ashen, waterlogged flesh burst into his mind. The tank followed, with vibrant pink blood bleeding through the water. His heart hammered against his ribcage. A foul sense of pleasure bloomed at the pit of his stomach.

Repeating. These nights just seemed to repeat. Shuichi sucked in a frustrated breath of winter air. Refusing to let a familiar presence fill his mind.

Shuichi gripped the railing, steeling himself, willing the sickening thrill of joy in his chest to fade. He opened his eyes. Staring wearily into the dark sky.

The killing game wasn't real. It was a stupid thing to think, considering how vividly real it felt. Every physical jolt, all emotional grief, each mental pain; it was all very, very real.

And yet, waking up in a capsule said otherwise. There were strangers pulling wires out of his pale, greasy skin, a heavy headset being lifted off the crown of his sweat-soaked bangs, and people in suits shaking his clammy hands. 'The killing game wasn't real' was a mantra he was told to repeat until he believed it.

"Want to know what else isn't real?" A prickly voice that matched his own hissed in his mind. Shuichi's fingers twitched in response. He turned his head away from the sky as if to deny it permission to speak. As if that ever worked. "You."

There had been a few shocking things he learned when he woke up.

One, the killing game was virtual reality.

Two, everyone was still alive.

And three, his pre-game self wasn't killed in the programming like it should have been.

Shuichi mopped hot tears out of his eyes. He realized the icy air nipping sharply at his skin. He blinked away the fog in his vision and looked at his porch. Ah... his... this wasn't his porch.

"...Shuichi?" A tired voice spoke up from behind him. Shuichi turned, sighing in relief to see Himiko standing in the doorway. *Right.* He swallowed hard to clear the lump in his throat. He was staying the night at Himiko's. Because with him preying on *his* mind, he needed company.

When their eyes connected, Himiko's half-lidded gaze melted into silent understanding. Wordlessly she extended a hand to him, which he gratefully took. The warmth of her palm pressed comfortingly against his freezing hand.

Himiko guided him inside. The sliding door closed softly behind them. Shuichi squinted in the darkness of the living room. 4:50 am. Shuichi rubbed his eyes, feeling more like weighted puncture wounds.

"Why did I have to end up being a weak character? Ugh, I wanted to be the blackened."

Shuichi winced, rubbing two fingers against his aching temple. A pinching headache always needles its way into his mind when *he* starts talking. It's beyond irritating.

Himiko gently squeezed his hand. She guided him to the couch, sitting beside him. Shuichi hadn't noticed his hands were still trembling. He swallowed thickly, his eyebrows meeting together as he gnawed his lower lip.

"He's... He's annoying you, isn't he?" Himiko said softly, the same way she whispered about any of the murders in the game. The same way she uttered swear words.

Shuichi took a deep breath and nodded.

"Her execution would have been amazing." Heat rushed to burn his face. Shuichi pressed his palms against his cheeks, his forehead pinching with tension.

Shuichi turned his head away from Himiko. "Please stop," he said weakly.

“A magic trick gone wrong.” He continued, a hiss of laughter tailing his words, “Trapped in the box. A saw pushing through her bones,” Sickening imagery bled into his mind. “Grinding,” he jeered. “Sawing.” A stage set the scene. “Cutting.” Blinding lights pointed to Himiko writhing in the box. “Ripping.” A scream showed on her pale face, horror pierced her agony-filled eyes. “Scraping.”

Blood poured from the crevices in the box. The nightmarish screams ringing in his ears cut off to an eerie quiet. “Sure, I would like to see the witch burned at the stake,” he chuckled. “But that was so last season, don’t you agree?”

Shuichi jerked his head with a shaky “No.” He gnawed his bottom lip until prickling numbness swelled under his teeth. Himiko rubbed his shoulder gently.

“Hey... He’s not real. Don’t listen to him.” Himiko’s voice shook in uncertainty.

Frustration resurfaced. Shuichi exhaled sharply. “...I know he’s not ‘real’, but he feels so incredibly real to me.”

“Me? Not real?” Cruel cackling spluttered in his mind. “That’s funny. Almost sad, even. The only fabricated ones here are you two.”

Himiko took Shuichi’s trembling hand, wet with tears, into hers. She squeezed his fingers, “I know it’s hard to get him to be quiet... Ah...um.” She’s nervous. Before she agreed to have Shuichi stay the night, she said she’ll never be able to comfort him correctly.

But Himiko carried too much self-doubt.

“...Why not have a talk with him? I-I know your therapist said not to treat him like he’s actually there, but he’s real to you, right?” She gave another squeeze, Shuichi squeezed back. “...Don’t let him bully you. Like Kokichi said once, right?”

“...Right.” Shuichi spoke hardly above a whisper. Confronting *him* was daunting and overwhelming. Shuichi’s convinced no good will come out of it. But then again, ignoring him didn’t help either.

So he took a deep breath, inhaling slowly, feeling his lungs clear and his chest rise. He exhaled slowly through his nose, focusing on that incessant, vexing voice pinching his mind. Pulling his legs tight to his chest, and letting go of Himiko’s hand, he let his forehead rest over his knees.

Another deep inhale.

Another slow exhale.

Inhale...

Exhale...

“...Oh, this is exciting.” That arrogant piercing tone erupted across the air louder than ever. Shuichi blinked as the scenery fell into view. He flinched once he took in the room.

The trial room stood in all its familiarity. The screens were still down from the last trial. Countless of them reached up into an endless ceiling. Sizzling static filled each one, digging into his ears. He gripped the podium to steady himself- the cold pressed to his palms felt all too real. Despite his roaring discomfort, he lifted his eyes to gaze at the person standing at a podium across from him.

“Did I annoy you enough?” His lips cracked into a taunting smile. Shuichi’s stomach twisted anxiously. Seeing his own features make such a cruel expression disgusted him. “So much so that you’d come here?” The young man gestured to the room around them. “To chat with me? I should feel honored, but I always hated how weak of a character I turned out to be.” He sighed, the smile never leaving his lips. “And now you’re convinced you’re real. All because, what? You have *feelings* too?” A sharp laugh tore through the air. Shuichi grimaced.

“I didn’t come here to be *mocked*,” Shuichi said coldly, ignoring the way his hands shook. His knuckles turned white as he squeezed the podium harder. “I’m sick of the way you treat me. I don’t care if you existed first, I don’t care if you weren’t created in a script, *I don’t care*.”

He forgot how the trial room enhanced his voice, making it louder, echoing up into the endless dark ceiling.

“You’re starting to sound like how you did in trial six!” His pre-game self leaned forward as if to take Shuichi in, in all his angered glory. “Shouting about how unfair the game was, denying hope and despair-!” Disappointment flickered in his calloused eyes, and pink colored his cheeks. “I liked you that way best. It’s better than an emotionally weak protagonist. Ooh! If I could give it another go, I’d change your empathy to apathy!”

“Enough!” Shuichi snapped, seething as his alter ego chuckled.

“Enough? Did you honestly think asking me to stop bothering you would do anything?” He gave Shuichi a flat stare. “You never learn. You can’t change anything about me, or the world you’re convinced you saved.”

The screens around them, still sizzling and crackling in the background, gave an electric pop. All screens blacked out before filling with videos of fans boycotting Danganronpa’s headquarters. Indistinguishable voices yelled across seas of people. The media flooded with rage, begging for another season. Shuichi gazed up at the screens. Panic rose in his chest. The air felt twice as heavy.

“Your attempts were futile.” The boy drawled out as if talking to a child. “You’ll never be seen as a person. That’s why you had no impact. Everyone saw it as Danganronpa finding a lazy excuse to end the series. People will still watch Danganronpa. They’ll watch your friends’ deaths, make explicit fanfictions of you, and create merchandise of you because you’re just a character. Your attempts to make people acknowledge your pain as real was honestly...” He chuckled, a tight grin plastered across his face.

“Pathetic.”

Futile. Pitiful. Pointless. A throbbing headache overwhelmed him. Heat burned his face red as he pushed his palms against his temples. The sound of his alter ego’s crazed laughter drove knives into his skull, hammering them in with each second he endured that yelling coming from the TV screens.

“That’s not true!” He yelled, the deafening buzzing sound falling silent. Blinking into black screens. He opened his bloodshot eyes, glaring at this young man who only now existed in his mind. “Even if people still wish to treat me like an unfeeling character with no sense of self, there are still people who heard my words!” His booming voice cut off his alter ego’s laughter.

“People are also rioting against the rise of Danganronpa! People are fighting to stop the videos of my friend’s death, even if it’s a spare few, it’s more than this world had before!” His amber eyes burned with passion as he glared. “So I don’t care if I’m real or fake- I don’t care! No matter what I am, no matter how the world sees me, I have my own thoughts, my own pain, and you will not tear down that reality!”

The air caught in his throat, and in a blink, the world plunged into darkness.

“...Shuichi?”

With a sharp inhale Shuichi's eyes flew open. Sweat clung to his skin as he swallowed hard. He was lying down on the couch, a pillow placed under his head, and blankets draped over him. He stared wide-eyed at Himiko who sat kneeled on the floor beside him.

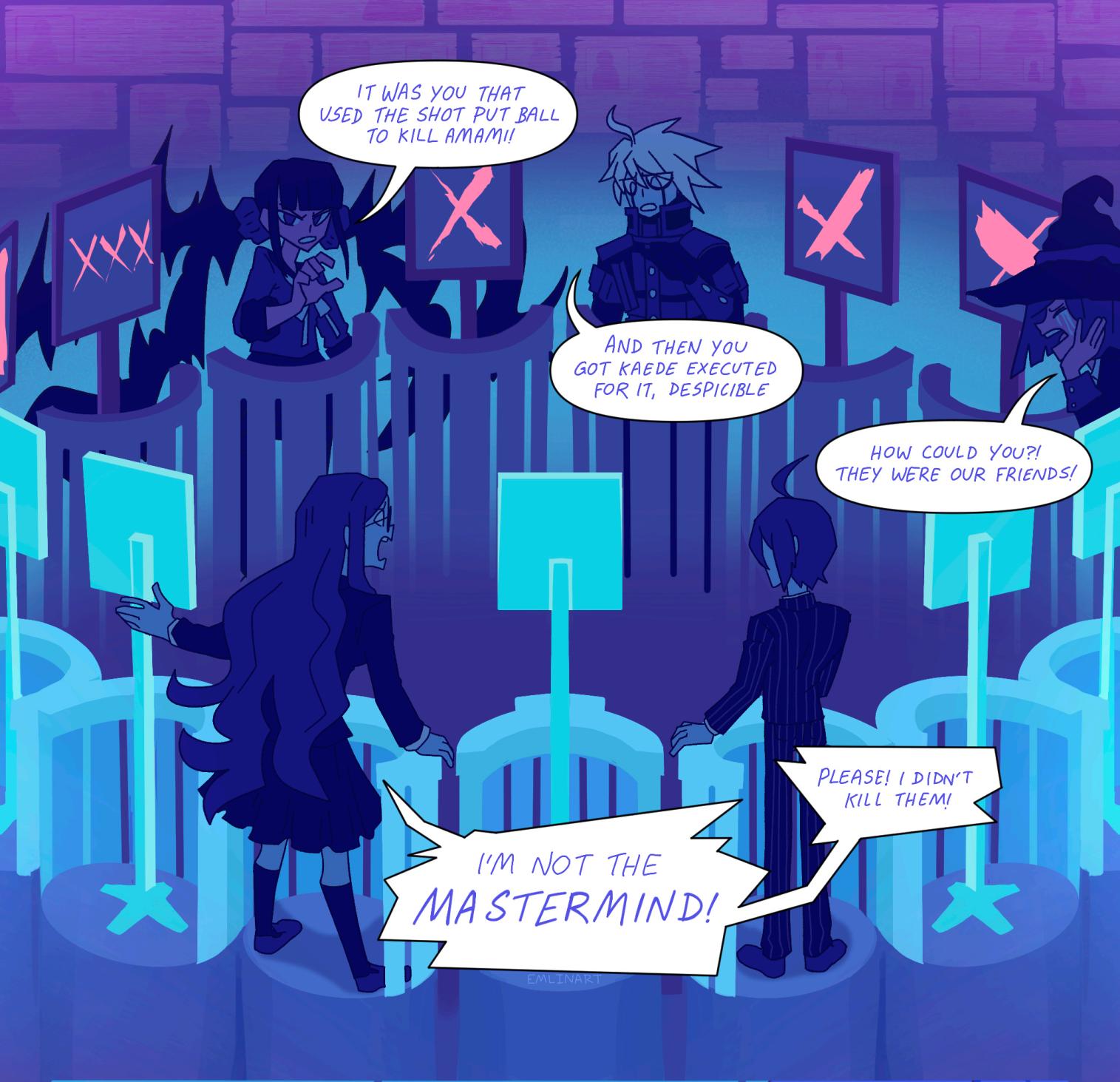
"You okay...? You fell asleep," she whispered. "You looked like you were having another nightmare."

6:00 am. Shuichi took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and sat up. Himiko watched in worry.

"...So did it help?" She asked, pushing her index fingers together nervously.

Shuichi looked up to the blue winter sky beyond the glass porch doors. He listened for a moment. He could hear himself take slow deep breaths, he heard the chime on the porch clink together in the breeze. He listened... and beyond those quiet sounds, he heard nothing. He only felt a small presence deep in the back of his mind. That version of himself was still there, just... quieted down.

"For now," Shuichi said softly, allowing himself to breathe in relief. "Just... for now."









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HOUSE OF MIRRORS

BY: HYPOXIA

They often say that home is where the heart is. It's a sentiment that — would Shuichi consider it to ring true — would lead him to believe that home is six-feet under, rotting away alongside blood-stained memories of a life so carefully crafted, it makes him wonder if there's any semblance of humanity left in those involved with shaping it. But home is neither here nor there, nor in the number of grimy hotel rooms he'd found himself bouncing between with every passing day.

It's almost scary, the familiarity behind the wooden floorboards creaking below his footsteps. There's an odd sensation — the acute awareness of what's behind the heavy door despite having no recollection of it whatsoever — and much like the thoughts racing through Shuichi's mind, the sentiment is quickly drowned out by the sound of a key clicking into place.

It's not particularly difficult to imagine himself having called the tiny apartment home at any point, at least from an outward perspective. It's a simple building with no extra frills, from the rusted payphones in the lobby, down to the rickety old laundry room at the end of the hall. But when Shuichi presses his palm to the freezing doorknob and leans his weight against the door, he's unsure if he's prepared to face what's inside despite his desperate attempts to convince himself otherwise.

It's a normal apartment.

Anticlimactic, an unhelpful voice in the back of Shuichi's head chimes in. Still, there's a sort of madness in the mundanity, which is something that Shuichi quickly becomes aware of as he steps into the apartment that he has no recollection of ever owning. He doesn't know what he's supposed to expect; there's no burning stench of rotting food, or rats cowering in the corner of the room. The kitchen counters are clear, the sink is empty, and — save for the thin layer of dust that's sealed the apartment like an old envelope does a letter detailing what once was — there's no sign that someone like Shuichi ever lived there at all.

Someone like Shuichi.

The thought leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

Perhaps he would've preferred to find the place crawling with roaches, a disgusting cesspool where the layers of dirt make it hard to see where he must've accidentally scratched his stove once, or where he probably dropped something on the kitchen floor, cracking the tile beneath.

But there's none of that. His initial visual sweep yields nothing tangible that he can throw away. He doesn't see anything that he could pack up and toss into a dumpster because if it's out of sight and out of memory, then it's most definitely out of mind.

Even in the living room, the only thing that even begins to hint at the person he was, the person whose presence he's been dreading despite it having yet to be found, is the small stack of home-burned DVDs labelled *Danganronpa 3*, each with accompanying episode numbers.

Finally, Shuichi wants to think.

It's the physical manifestation of an obsession he can't remember, yet has become so intimately familiar with — the obsession that's left him hopping from hotel to hotel, only to now finally gather up the courage to go back to where it all began.

It's something to hold against himself, something to remind him of how far he's come ever since both his literal and metaphorical worlds were shattered.

But when he sees the number of legally-purchased noir films behind the pile of *Danganronpa* DVDs, any sense of relief he must've felt in that moment vanishes from the pit of his stomach. They're familiar ones, too. Ones that he thinks he might remember, if the gentle pull at the back of his mind means anything.

And yet, there's no memory of having watched them on the faded couch he finds himself crumbling into.

No, all he sees is his uncle's detective study, an old-fashioned television, someone sitting beside him commenting on the lack of realism. When Shuichi looks at the couch cushion beside him, it's stiff and still set in its shape, as if it'd been rarely used. So unlike the soft, lumpy cushion he's currently slumped against.

The entire purpose of this trip had been to see what was salvageable, to see what things he could throw away and what he could potentially take with him to a new home. Take it as a form of therapy, one of the Danganronpa producers had said before Shuichi promptly slammed the hotel door in his face. And despite his searing hatred for anyone who wore that stupid bear-eye logo around their neck, he'd swallowed his pride long enough to try and find closure in the dumpster of some cheap apartment.

All that, and he only has a plastic bag full of pirated DVDs to show for it. It's frustrating and nauseating, and when he gets up to splash some water in his face in the bathroom, the sight of the same brand of toothpaste he'd bought last week makes his stomach roll.

Once again, the familiarity is all there — the reflections of old water droplets dried up on the mirror, a soap stain leftover from what Shuichi imagines was a bottle of face wash, a navy toothbrush that looks like it's seen better days. Even the image painted in the glass is so hauntingly recognizable; tired eyes trace the reflection of his pallid cheeks and chapped lips, and Shuichi thinks it's like looking at someone that he once knew half a lifetime ago. Here in this apartment, he supposes he is.

He slams the door to the bathroom much harder than initially intended, and through his mindless stumble, his feet bring him to a door at the end of the hallway.

Realistically, Shuichi knows what he'll find on the other side of the door. Still, once he brings himself to push it open, it's just like struggling to remember the face of a childhood friend who's long since passed.

He tries.

He tries so hard to remember, to forget. He's never seen this bedspread before, but that particular shade of blue is definitely one he has in his current closet. He's never read the books stacked along these shelves, but the name of every single main character is just on the tip of his tongue, like the bitter aftertaste of a least favorite food. The entire room is a memorial, a homage to someone who never should've been honored in the first place, and yet.

Yet, Shuichi's still here, shoving away the memories clawing at the deepest parts of his brain.

There's a desk in the corner. It's older, and the scratches embedded into its grain speak stories that Shuichi knows he'll never want to hear. But it isn't the cracked wood that draws his attention, nor the stack of completed school worksheets piled in the center of the desk.

No, it's the Danganronpa sticker sticking out in between the gaps of the mess. Hesitantly, Shuichi reaches out and brushes aside the surrounding mess, revealing that the sticker is simply being used as a seal for an envelope. A letter, Shuichi realizes. His resolve might waver, but his fingers don't.

The tearing open of the letter is a mindless action, one that Shuichi does without realization.

He knows that none of the Danganronpa staff are responsible — they don't care enough to bother prying into his personal life, much less leave him a note. Besides, a quick glance into the room's trash can tells him all he needs to know. The backing paper is still in there, complete with a red and white border from where the sticker must've been removed. The familiar handwriting doesn't catch him off guard, unlike nearly everything else in the apartment.

Shuichi, the letter begins in blocky scrawl.

It's long. Surprisingly so, actually. An entire page covered from edge to edge in smudged ballpoint pen, all of it slightly squashed, as if there were too many unstructured thoughts to fit on a single sheet.

Shuichi doesn't make it past the first line before he has to sit on the ground, his stomach churning.

Glad to see you've made it back home, it reads.
Home.

This haunted apartment, empty spaces filled by the ghost of a person Shuichi would give his life to never meet again.

Not that it's surprising. You know I planned ahead for this. Or, I guess we did.

This version of Shuichi — this distorted, long-dead version of himself — knew that he would come back, and he would come back physically unscathed. It's eerie.

The letter continues:

So, what was it like? Were we right in thinking that Kaede would be the perfect partner, in crime or otherwise?

(Yes, and God, it hurts to admit.)

Oh, and what about Kokichi? Was he as difficult as we thought he'd be? I swear, those archetypes are getting old, but it doesn't make them any easier to figure out.

(There was nothing easy about peeling back layer after layer of lies, only to be left with a rotten truth and a needless death.)

I already know he's not making it out of there alive. His types never do.

(He wants to stop reading, wants to forget —)

Speaking of ones who weren't gonna make it, how was Kaito? You know I wasn't we weren't a huge fan of his after running into him at the audition. Still, things change. The Ultimate Detective is usually a pretty likable person, so maybe you turned it around to make it work.

(There hasn't been a day where he hasn't thought of Kaito, and of his smile. It takes every bit of Shuichi's remaining brainpower to blur the edges of blood coating the seam of his smile, and it's an act done solely to keep the rest of his sanity intact.)

But I've saved the best question for last, of course. Did the producers actually go through with my idea of making a detective be the blackened? Did you actually get to kill anyone, or were you just the one responsible behind the scenes?

Responsibility. Shuichi had simply had one — to make sure that his friends had the opportunity to escape the killing game and see the true light of day once more. He had a responsibility as the Ultimate Detective, and instead he found himself half-responsible for their deaths.

Shuichi doesn't consider himself to be skilled with words by any means, but the idea of responsibility rings impossibly true in his mind.

He killed Kaede when he watched her get dragged out like a dog, unable to do anything beyond watch as she struggled as hard as she could. He killed Kokichi, he killed Kaito, and it was only by the grace of his own luck that he didn't manage to kill Himiko and Maki. The thought makes him feel sick, not only because of the memories it dredges up, but because there hadn't been a single thing his past self hadn't predicted. Hadn't known. As if he could read Shuichi like the back of his hand.

The letter drones on and on, detailing some critical details his past self was sure Shuichi would be bound to forget. His apparent favorite restaurant was three blocks down, and the grocery store around the corner always had the best deals. There was disposable silverware in the bottom cabinet under the sink, where he kept a lot of the cleaning supplies, but he was running low on paper plates...

Shuichi doesn't care. His eyes have long since glazed over with each passing word. He tears apart the letter into tiny pieces. He can figure out his own life, with or without every mindless little detail.

Because when he looks down at remnants of torn paper, especially the pieces with crumpled edges from the iron grip he'd had on it for the past several minutes, he sees both a time capsule and a mirror.















TWO OF A KIND

BY: KATZENJAMMIN

Shuichi Saihara was entirely out of his element.

What the high profile politician who had requested him to investigate this case—the murder of his granddaughter, brutally stabbed on the night of her seventeenth birthday—was thinking, he had little clue. His best guess was that it had to do with his title and the renown that came with being a student at Hope's Peak Academy. It wouldn't surprise him if they thought he was some kind of prodigy because of that status, but in reality, it didn't mean much: he was an apprentice, a greenhorn in the world of criminal investigation.

The real genius was the other detective who had been assigned this case alongside him.

There was no doubt in his mind that Kyoko Kirigiri was the perfect fit for this job. Her conduct told of the years of experience she had over him, and her specialization in homicide only exaggerated the gap. However much he tried to make a better effort at driving away negative thoughts, that was the plain truth.

But the grieving family had made a point of getting both of them on the case, and he wouldn't deny their wish. Maybe they figured that two heads were better than one. This request was probably made under the assumption that their skills were equal, as they shared the same title of Ultimate Detective. Like he remotely deserved to be put in the same league as her.

Stop. Shuichi clenched his teeth beneath tight lips. Getting distracted would make him less productive, and it wasn't like comparing himself to Kyoko had ever benefited him before.

Right now, he needed all the brainpower he could muster to help her work out why it was that the murder weapon was nowhere to be found. None of the sharp objects they'd found matched the wound on the victim's neck, and forensics had no success in finding blood on them. Had the culprit brought it here? No, the security detail was thorough for the soirée, so they must have used something in the mansion. Did the culprit take it with them, then? That too seemed impossible. The motion-activated cameras hadn't caught anyone or anything leaving before the police arrived. Did the culprit hide it somewhere? They'd practically turned this place upside down and found nothing.

"I don't understand," Shuichi muttered, pacing back and forth. "Where could it have gone?"

A short distance away, Kyoko stood, deliberating the situation more calmly than he was. She held her chin in a black-gloved hand. "It has to be here. It's impossible for the murder weapon to have left the house."

"It's not that I don't agree," he began, frown deepening. "Yet, we've investigated every single room, and we still haven't found it. Unless there's some secret area in this mansion..."

"Not likely. The head of this house told us that there's nothing of the sort, and the contractor's records confirmed he was there when it went through a complete renovation two years ago. Evidently, he has no motive to lie to us, either."

"Then why?"

There was a long stretch of silence as he attempted to sort through the muddled bits of information in his brain.

"Shuichi," Kyoko finally spoke, and he had to fight back the urge to tear his gaze away from hers, piercing and analytical. "You have bags under your eyes."

He blinked. "What?"

"Also, the edges of your sclera are tinted red. You didn't get much sleep last night, did you?"

They both knew the answer to that question. It was highly likely that she'd noticed since the beginning, but she'd done him the grace of not mentioning it until they weren't around the police squad. It didn't mean he wasn't still embarrassed, though. His hand reached for a nonexistent brim as he gave a haggard sigh, taking a lock of hair between his fingers instead.

"I'm sorry. I had some trouble falling asleep... So I just read over the case files until I passed out at my desk," he admitted with some amount of shame. What was he thinking, pulling an all-nighter right before this important investigation? "I know it isn't good for me."

As far as he could tell, there was neither sympathy nor scorn in her features. Kyoko was inscrutable as always. For all he knew, she might be secretly judging him for not taking care of himself.

"Then we should take a break."

"I'm fine. I can keep going."

"Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should."

Now she was wearing her disapproval openly. Great.

"But we haven't found anything concrete yet," he argued, despite knowing better. "I can't stop now. How about I take a break after I've figured out anything useful? Listen, maybe the contractor was wrong. We can check the records ourselves to see if—"

"You know as well as I do that there's no point. Breaks are as important as any other part of the job." Her look was pointed. "Or do you not value my opinion as your partner?"

"N-No! That's not..."

Kyoko didn't wait for him to finish a sentence he was fumbling to find the end to. "Let's go. There's no time to get any meaningful rest, but there is something that would refresh your mind." She turned around and began to walk toward the exit, expecting him to follow.

And follow he did.



Shuichi took in everything on the table from the empty cup in front of him to the coffee pitcher in the center, guilt flickering across his eyes even with the knowledge that they were free to partake in this break room. Kyoko, sitting right across from him, had none of the hesitations he did. Dark liquid pooled into her cup and gave off wisps of steam as she poured her drink. When she immediately raised it to her lips after setting down the pitcher, he asked, without really thinking about it:

"You're not going to add anything to that?"

His upperclassman looked up. "No. Why would I?"

"I mean...it's really bitter. I couldn't drink it black." As if to illustrate his point, he reached for the small bowl of sugar cubes once he was done filling his own cup.

"It ruins the flavor." She took a meager sip. "I've been drinking it this way since I was a child."

A smile formed on his face. "As expected of someone like you..."

Though her expression barely shifted, the pause of bemusement made him feel as if he'd pressed a wrong button. "'Someone like me'? Could you elaborate?"

"Um." The explanation that popped into mind that was it seemed symbolic of themselves. Kyoko, the hardboiled detective, having a cup of pure black coffee. Him, the amateur sleuth, having an oversweet brown concoction. But instead of voicing that line of logic, he discarded it in favor of something that hopefully did not sound nearly as stupid. "It's just...a feeling I get? You're very stoic, so I guess it'd surprise me if you were fond of sweets."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Me being stoic is enough for you to make an assumption about my preferred tastes?"

"No, well—" The boy shook his head, his laugh a nervous sound. "S-Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it." He took a drink to drown the embarrassment with hot coffee.

Kyoko gave no further comment before turning back to her own beverage. It left behind a silence that Shuichi felt was slightly awkward, but he also recognized that Kyoko was simply like this, and it didn't always mean she was offended. Though he wasn't confident he could call her a friend yet, they've talked several times before. Mainly to exchange thoughts on their current cases, with plenty of lulls when he didn't know what to say, or she seemed especially disinterested in conversing. She wasn't one for small talk, and that was fine with him.

But after a period of quiet, Shuichi shifted gears, speaking again. "I prefer tea myself. I like coffee just fine, but I grew up drinking tea since my uncle often had it in the house."

"Tea is alright," she remarked. "If I had a choice, I might have drunk it more, but it was out of necessity that I started drinking coffee."

"Because of your work?"

She nodded. "I happened to grow fond of the flavor over time."

There was a niggling concern for a younger Kyoko that he hoped was well hidden. "That's good. I used to ask my uncle about his detective work during tea time; he'd pour me a cup and tell me what happened to him that day. Of course, that stopped once I began working as his assistant, but it's a fond memory I have." He took pause. "Say, Kyoko, I've been wondering... You come from a long line of detectives, don't you?"

"I do. Is there something about my family that interests you?"

"Well, I can't help but be interested," he admitted, chuckling. "The Kirigiris are renowned in the industry. But that wasn't what I wanted to focus on... I wanted to ask if your family was the reason you became a detective."

Her countenance remained neutral even as her question struck him as accusatory. "What do you plan to do with that information?"

"What? Nothing. I was curious since you're the only other person I've met who also has a history of detective work in the family."

"I see." Accepting this, Kyoko gave her answer shortly: "...Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't."

"Huh?"

"I was raised to be a detective. You could say it was my family, the way I was educated, or the opportunities that shaped my experiences. Maybe it's all of those things, or none of them. Considering that, don't you think it'd be difficult to pinpoint exactly why I became a detective?" Crossing her arms, she finished, a firm candor to her words, "What I know is that I have pride in what I do. That's all I need."

"...That's...quite an answer." Whether she was being evasive or she genuinely couldn't tell why, he didn't know. All the same, it was apparent how intense she was when it came to her work. "But it makes sense."

"What about you?" A sliver of a smirk tugged at her lips. "It's only fair to share your origin after asking for mine. Was your uncle the reason you became a detective?"

His gaze flicked up, slightly surprised at the query. "Kind of. I only intended to help out at his agency as thanks for looking after me, but through that, I ended up becoming a detective and getting accepted to Hope's Peak." Not satisfied with that, he gave it more thought, staring down at his coffee cup. "However, I think the reason I stuck with it is simply that... I like being useful to people. It feels good to help out others with the skills and knowledge I've acquired. Even if that's a pretty generic answer."

"It's the answer you found on your own—I don't see a reason to think it inferior to others. Mine could be considered vague, but it doesn't matter."

"Ah, you're right, of course. We have our own goals and what we want to achieve as detectives. Our paths may be different, but even so, we're both searching for the truth." Shuichi gave a decisive nod. "Still, I'm glad I can understand your thought process more."

"...Likewise."

He had no idea what it was like to be raised as a detective. He couldn't imagine the things Kyoko's seen, what demanding jobs she's handled that made her rely on caffeine from probably too young an age. Perhaps that was part of why she pushed him to take a breather.

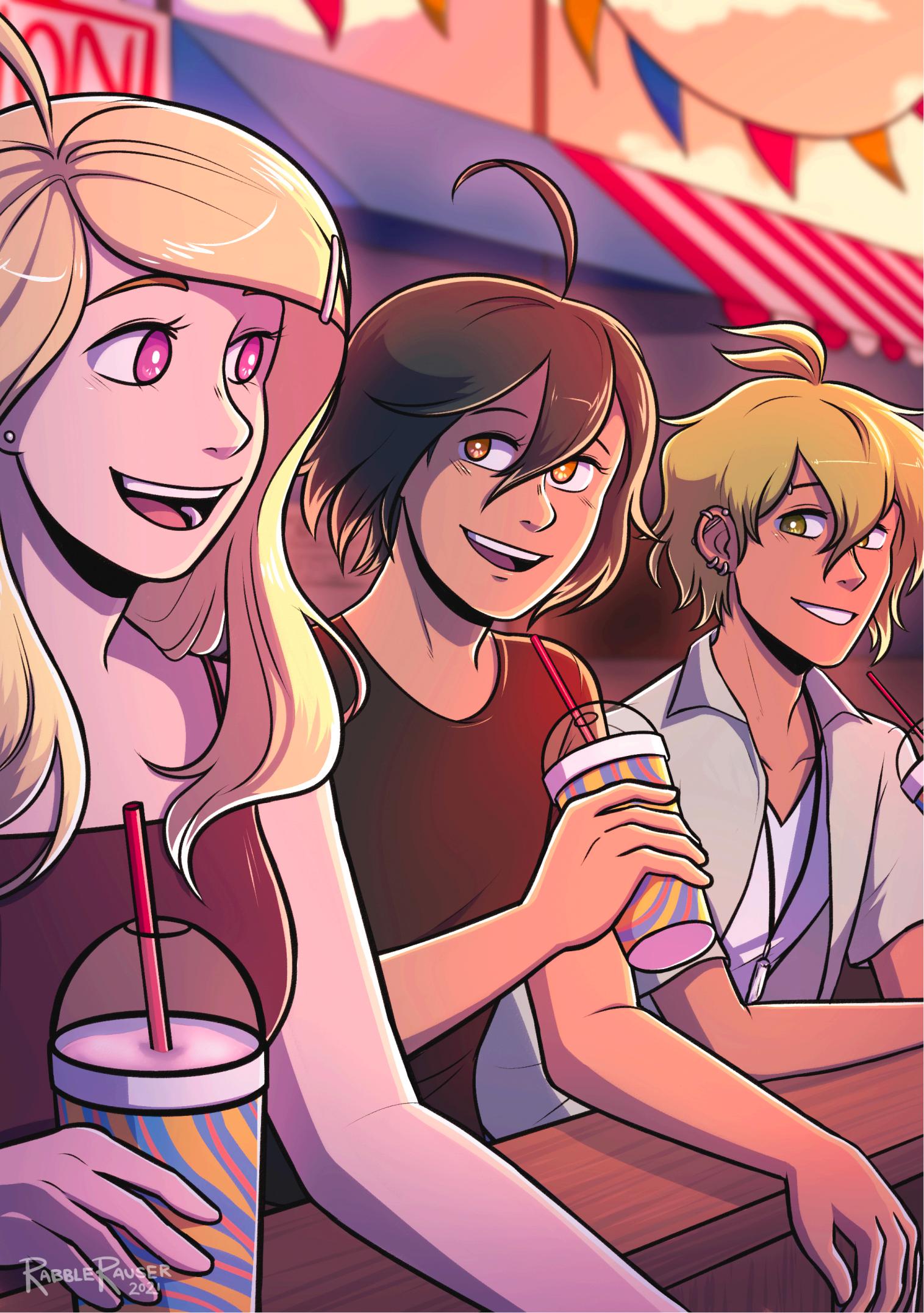
Because she didn't always have the privilege to?

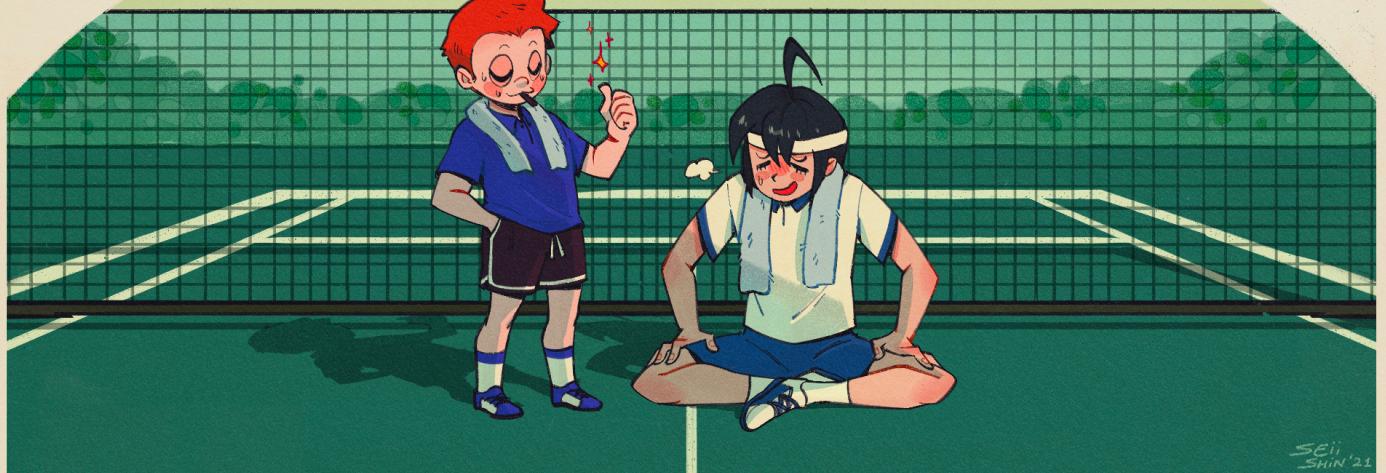
But it was best not to overthink things, Shuichi figured.

For now, he would enjoy the taste of his sugary coffee and make the most of this reprieve.















NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE

BY: GOLDENREDHEAD

Shuichi shifts uncomfortably in his seat, the glare of the lights high above his head blinding. He can feel the sweat rolling lazily down his back beneath the thick material of the Ultimate Detective's uniform that he's been forced to wear. Team Danganronpa insists that they wear those silly costumes to keep playing the roles that stole their lives. He remembers Miu trying to argue with the executive producers about it, just once, only to have the contract none of them remember singing shoved in her face. Shuichi's used to it by now, going through the motions and following the instructions obediently, careful not to ask too many questions or voice any objections like the good puppet that he is.

He sits anxiously, waiting for the moment when cameras inevitably zoom on his face and the host turns to him with that wide plastic smile and sharp stare that feels like it's boring into his skin and penetrating his soul.

He's been in this exact scenario before, way too many times to count. He always feels so exposed as hundreds of eyes follow his every move, hawk-like and unrelenting. It's almost like he's being undressed by them, analyzed like a frog that's about to be dissected by a bunch of curious biology students who are poking and probing at him to see what makes him tick.

It's a sickening experience and it doesn't get easier. It never gets easier.

The dreaded moment finally arrives, the host of the show motions to him. "And now it's time to greet one of our survivors! The Ultimate Detective is at your service tonight, folks!"

The audience goes wild, cheering and yelling and whistling, and a hot wave of embarrassment hits Shuichi as all of the attention focuses on him, coloring his cheeks pink. He can feel a strained smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Smile," his stylist always says, pursing her lips with distaste at his miserable expression as she applies the eyeliner, almost putting it right into his eye. "You could at least pretend to be happy to be here. Many would kill to be in your place, you know."

He isn't sure if he even knows how to smile anymore, but he tries nonetheless. After all, it's what the contract says.

“So, Shuichi,” the host addresses him cheerfully once Shuichi makes his way on stage, sitting awkwardly at the verge of his seat, “how does it feel to be the most well-known detective in the world?”

Shuichi swallows thickly around the bile lodged firmly in his throat, forcing a small smile.

“It’s good,” he says simply and instantly cringes internally.

He’s never been a very good liar.

The host laughs good naturedly. “Just good? You are way too humble, Shuichi. You made history with that ending! Many fans are curious about your plans for the future now that the last season of Danganronpa is over. Are you thinking about pursuing a career as a detective?”

Shuichi frowns. The mere suggestion is bizarre. “No, I don’t think so.”

A murmur of disappointment passes through the audience. The host nods in agreement, but doesn’t let it dim his facade of fake cheerfulness. “Oh well, it’s disappointing to hear that but I’m sure that whatever it is that you decide to do now will be a huge success!”

Shuichi smiles tightly, giving a curt nod.

The host chuckles and then drops his voice into a theatrical whisper. “Between you and me, though,” he starts as if they’re in on some kind of secret, “is there some advice you could give your fans about how to follow in your footsteps? I’m sure many of us are dying to learn more about who the Ultimate Detective truly is and how you became one!”

Shuichi blinks, confused by the question and the roar of agreement from the audience that follows. He can see them leaning in closer, listening carefully and latching onto his every word. They’re staring at him with hungry eyes and, vaguely, he thinks that even back in the killing game, surrounded by people desperate to survive and manipulated into killing, he’s never felt more like a prey.

I used to be just like them, he thinks weakly, his stomach churning in discomfort at the realization. Suddenly, he feels like throwing up what little he managed to eat this morning.

He doesn't remember the final trial well, not really, but the video Tsumugi showed them is still fresh in his memory. He sees it so clearly whenever he closes his eyes, it's as if it's been imprinted beneath his eyelids, a frequent guest in his nightmares. His own face twisted in blind adoration, all bloodshot eyes and messy hair. He looked like an animal back there, driven by some kind of unhealthy obsession, corrupted by the very organization that turned him into who he is today. Into someone who doesn't even exist outside of that pixelated world, soaked in pink blood and haunted by monochromatic bears.

Shuichi didn't die, not the way the others did, and he knows he should be grateful for that. Sometimes, however, deep at night or during their long and tedious group therapy sessions, he almost wishes that he did. It's a shameful thought, one he would never voice out loud, but can't help but have despite all that.

He's seen the lasting effects of the in-game deaths, the way Kaede keeps forgetting words or how hollow Kokichi's gaze looks every now and then, staring into the distance with unblinking and hollow eyes. Kaito's cough never stopped, not really, and Shuichi's seen Gonta scream at the sight of a spider crawling down the wall, knocking over the table in his hurry to get away as fast as possible. But it doesn't stop him from being envious of people like Rantaro who died fast and early, long before the real nightmare could even begin.

Shuichi remembers it all with striking clarity, the pink staining the floor, bodies staring at him with unseeing eyes, the smell of death and decay clinging to the walls... It's all so fresh in his memory and sometimes it's like he's still back there, trapped and with no way out.

And there he is now, surrounded by people who not only enjoyed all this trauma and death, but would also gladly give up everything to experience what he did, to see the bodies of their friends littering the floor and given no time to mourn, to wake up one day only to find out that everything he knew is nothing but a lie, a masterful writing of a writer for whom he is nothing more than a bunch of pixels on the screen.

Something in Shuichi snaps.

"I don't think you would really want to go through the same thing I did," he informs the host, voice quiet but strangely confident.

The man's mouth widens in a surprised little 'o', staring at him in wide-eyed shock for a second too long until he manages to recover and shake off his initial surprise and continue the interview.

"Looks like Shuichi here doesn't want a competition," he says teasingly and turns to the audience with a playful wink.

Shuichi shakes his head, hands clenched into fists where they rest in his lap, nails digging into skin and leaving crescent-like imprints on his palms, the sting of pain grounding. "No, I don't," he says. "If I could, I would end the games for good. I would end Danganronpa for good so no one has to go through it ever again."

The stunned silence that follows his statement is deafening.

The host reacts first once again, laughing too loudly as he slaps Shuichi's back like he's just told the funniest joke. "Ha! Good one!"

He's still laughing, but this close Shuichi can see the well-contained fury in his eyes, the way his smile appears to be strained around the edges.

"You all watched us suffer," Shuichi spits out, shaking in quiet rage as he addresses the audience. "You think that just because Team Danganronpa says it's safe then it must be true."

Something in the host's eyes turns panicked as more and more words spill out of Shuichi's mouth and he can see him glancing nervously backstage as if hoping someone would tell him what to do now that his attempt at damage control doesn't seem to be working. Shuichi can't help but feel a sense of mean satisfaction throbbing beneath his skin, weeks of resentment spilling out of him in a flood he can no longer contain.

The host coughs, clearing his throat, and tries once more, voice too tense to be anything other than forced. "Saihara-san, I can assure you that Team Danganronpa would never endanger its contestants—"

“Bullshit,” Shuichi interrupts rudely. He’s heard it all, all the excuses, all the little ways they find to explain and justify the cruelty they inflicted on them, anything to clear the conscience and convince themselves and everyone else that somehow it’s all right, that all this suffering didn’t matter because it was not real. It’s funny how he’s no longer Shuichi but Saihara-san now that he no longer chooses to play their game.

“You watched us all *die* for your enjoyment,” he continues bitterly, his voice rising into a near-yell. His eyes sting with tears and his ears ring as the last bits of his sanity finally slip away.

The host gulps, raising his hands in a calming gesture as if he’s talking to a frightened animal. “Saihara-san, you have to calm down, please. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” Shuichi says, seething. He’s standing now, but he has no idea when he stood up, his body moving automatically. “I did *everything* you asked me to do, I gave up everything I had. Maybe it’s time that you stopped asking for more.”

Everything around him erupts into chaos, the audience, the host, everyone seems to be talking over each other, yelling and looking around as they scramble for some reaction among all the confusion caused by his words.

From the corner of his eye, he can see the security guards entering the stage and some man yelling frantically from behind the scenes for the cameramen to quit filming and go to commercials.

Shuichi smiles, feeling more in control than he’s felt in a long time.

The damage is done. No matter how they try to spin it now, it’s too late.

He doesn’t fight once the guards finally reach him.

He’s yelling something, he knows, maybe more accusations while he still can, but he can’t distinguish the words over the roar and commotion around him. His throat feels raw and raspy but he is no longer trembling, a sense of relief crashing into him. He vaguely realizes that he’s being pushed back, someone’s arms wrapping around him and forcing his wrists back with enough force to form bruises.

And then there's a prick against his neck, a brief sensation of what could only be pain, and he can feel himself falling, the world suddenly tipping upside down around him. It feels as if liquid ice has been injected into his veins, spreading over his body and making his limb numb and unresponsive. Blurry figures are swimming in and out of his field of view, shouting something he can't quite understand, vowels and consonants blending together into indistinguishable gibberish.

Suddenly, everything feels distant, his consciousness slipping away quickly. He hears the words like 'mental breakdown' and 'it's just the stress' being thrown around by faceless shadows hovering somewhere above him, but they no longer mean anything to him.

He smiles — a genuine smile, for the first time in forever — when darkness finally claims him.

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HYPOXICDREAMS



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GOLDEN-REDHEAD



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